

Greenwich Peninsula already has a cable car, a nearby airport and an arena that hosts Beyoncé and Pharrell. It will soon be joined by 10,000 homes, an art gallery, an orchard and the capital's hottest new restaurant. Harry Mount meets the team building

London's ultimate village

Portraits by Pål Hansen



SIMON HEIJDENS
Artist

TOM DIXON
Designer

BOB ALLIES
Architect

CONRAD SHAWCROSS
Sculptor

STEVIE PARLE
Chef/restaurant owner

THOMAS HOBLYN
Landscape designer

JEMIMA BURRILL
Curator

STEVE LAZARIDES
Gallerist

GEMMA BROKIS
Theatre producer

JULIA BARFIELD
Architect

Waterworld
Computer generated
image of Greenwich
Peninsula



Until now, Greenwich Peninsula has been famous for two things: the Millennium Dome and a starring role in the *EastEnders* credits – where the river swerves in that huge S bend, Greenwich Peninsula is the curved chunk of land on the right-hand side of the screen. From next year, however, the Peninsula will loom much larger on London’s horizon. Like the Frank Gehry/Norman Foster mega-development upstream at Battersea Power Station, the idea is to create a hi-tech village for arty, foodie, design-savvy Londoners. Developer Knight Dragon, an Asian company, owned by the Cheng family, which also built The Knightsbridge residential development, is transforming 190 acres of the old marshes where orchards and shipyards used to be. There will be 10,000 new homes – from £250,000 studios to £1.7m penthouses, in crisp, mid-rise blocks – along with restaurants, cafés, galleries, artists’ studios and a park. Twenty-five per cent of the homes will be given over to affordable housing.

The £5bn project, bisected by the Greenwich Meridian, is scattered with famous names, from sculptor Conrad Shawcross, designer of the *Blade Runner*-esque sculpture that greets visitors to the project, to Banksy’s earliest exhibitor Steve Lazarides. There is no overarching design concept, unlike at Battersea. There is no foreign inspiration either – the idea is to give the best of British artistic, architectural and restaurant talent a chance to create a utopia on the Thames. If people are going to pay way over the odds for their homes in the housing crisis, the feeling is that they need more bang for their buck: better design, along with all the arty and foodie add-ons you would expect from moving to Shoreditch or Bermondsey.

The Peninsula is divided into five different districts, with no buildings rising higher than

41 storeys, thanks to the planes of neighbouring City Airport. Marks Barfield, the architects behind the London Eye, have built the sleek, glazed Gateway Pavilion, connected by a brass-trimmed canopy. ‘It’s to do with place-making,’ says Julia Barfield. ‘We want to put the building in its place, particularly in relation to the Dome. The canopy is the last ripple of the curve from the Dome. The brass edge is a nod to the industrial past of the area. The building is also a gateway to the rest of the development. The whole project has an air of those great Victorian schemes such as Battersea Park and King’s Cross. You’ve got to create a sense of place, rooted in the past, with none of the feeling that you’ve just landed from Mars.’

Planning has been hitch-free, not least because the Greater London Authority (GLA) is Knight Dragon’s development partner. The original masterplan by Terry Farrell (Boris’ favourite architect, who designed M16 and is behind the proposed Earls Court redevelopment) is ten years old and has since been reviewed by the GLA, who asked Knight Dragon to take it over. Knight Dragon got full ownership of the site last November, after taking an

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JULIA BARFIELD, ARCHITECT

initial 60 per cent stake in 2012. The company is in it for the long haul: this is a 25-year project. Construction began in 2013 and people will begin moving in next year. At last month’s sales opening, buyers – from young professionals to retiring downsizers moving out of big houses in Greenwich and Blackheath – queued overnight. An art gallery and café are already open; Craft, a restaurant, food shop, bar and café set up by chef Stevie Parle, with Tom Dixon-designed interiors, will open next spring at the site’s northern end, in the shadow of The O2 Arena (the café opens this month). Craft will have its own coffee-roaster, bakery and meat-curing area, and will source some of its fruit and veg from the new park, with its small orchard. The menu will be based around the freshest of British food, with fish from Dorset and breads baked in an on-site wood oven.

Parle, who has already conquered East and West London with his restaurants Rotorino in Hackney and Dock Kitchen in Ladbrooke Grove, says, ‘The idea is to tighten links with suppliers and use produce from British farmers and fishermen. There will be a British, handmade feel.’

Dixon, creator of the capital’s most sought-after pendant lamps, has also designed parts of the park and some of the residential areas. ‘I wanted to bring back a sense of geography,’ he says. ‘The Peninsula has a long and chequered history. I was trying to bring back the past with the fruiting trees, an echo of the days when the Peninsula was a market garden.’

The park’s overall design is by landscape



Greenwich groupies,
clockwise from
left: artist Conrad
Shawcross; Shunt
theatre company's
Gemma Brokis;
chef Stevie Parle



and garden designer Thomas Hoblyn, with Alys Fowler and Design Research Studio under the creative direction of Dixon. 'We are trying to make a natural landscape, a calm area within a busy area,' says Hoblyn. 'The aim is to make it look as if man had left it in the industrial era and it has been left to grow wild ever since. So we put alders in, which are the first pioneer species, and very healing to the soil. The landscape shapes are based on the mudflat shapes you see further downstream when you're landing at City Airport. The streams carved out a sort of estuarine sculpting and that's what we're trying to emulate.'

Within the 1.6 miles of river frontage there will be a golf driving range and there are also plans for a film studio, currently at an early design stage, being worked on by the GLA and architects Allies & Morrison. Leading the cultural assault is sculptor Conrad Shawcross, who once turned the Roundhouse in Camden into a giant timepiece. He is designing a permanent artwork for the site's low-carbon energy centre. 'It's not so much a sculpture,' says Shawcross, 'it's more a strategy to break up the surface of a working energy centre; an architectural response to deal with a utilities unit. There will be abstract, geometrical forms, with a touch of humour, to camouflage the energy centre. I'm using perforated aluminium on a big scale – it'll be 50 metres high and 20 metres wide, but only three metres deep, like a rectangular blade. It's partly inspired by the old gasometer next door. The site reminded me of New York, with the Hudson River and the East River on either side. The Peninsula has the Thames on both sides, to east and west, and the sun will rise and set through the work.'

Steve Lazarides, who owns the Lazarides Gallery in Fitzrovia, has set up a large printing studio for his clients and several artists'

studios on the Peninsula. 'The developers are very unusual in bringing a lot of culture into the place,' he says. 'I've spent 20 years being chased off building sites by other developers, now we're being invited on to one of the biggest in the world.' Lazarides will also be leading bird-watching tours of the site, which is rich in goldfinches and redstarts.

At the Gateway Pavilion, the NOW Gallery is currently showing *Shade* (above), an installation by Simon Heijdens, until December. In *Shade*, a cellular glass façade filters natural sunlight into a constantly moving kaleidoscope of light and shadow, directly choreographed by the weather on the Peninsula. Shows will rotate on a three-monthly basis; the next exhibition, in January, will be by Robert Orchardson. On Friday Lates at the gallery, there will be a series of artistic performances, including contemporary dance. 'Millions of people walk past us every year on their way to The O₂ Arena,' says Jemima Burrill, the gallery's curator. 'We want them to come in and make them feel like it's their gallery. You must have a cultural element to the Peninsula or it's dead.'

Today, the Peninsula is a surreal mix of the



Peninsula people, clockwise from above: designer Tom Dixon; curator Jemima Burrill; gallerist Steve Lazarides

ultra-modern – the curved glass of the NOW Gallery and the spreading mass of the Dome – and echoes of rundown, industrial yesteryear. The Emirates Air Line cable car lands slap-bang in the middle of the Peninsula village, which should give it some much-needed extra custom. A little downstream, a disused coaling jetty is now a temporary platform for performances, and there is a programme of pop-ups celebrating Greenwich Peninsula – last month, theatre company Shunt presented *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face*, an immersive theatre experience housed in shipping containers.

It is extraordinary that the Peninsula, such a big slice of London, has lain neglected for so long. That neglect lies in the Peninsula's origins as marshland, produced by the Thames as it cut a path to the North Sea. The marshiness meant the soil was unsuitable for farming, so while the rest of London was first cultivated and then built on, the Greenwich Peninsula became a backwater, the land that time forgot. It wasn't until the early 17th century that Dutch engineers drained the marshes, allowing the development of pasture and meadow. Even then, the Peninsula remained a place for hazardous businesses, such as the government's

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gunpowder depot, built in 1694. In the 19th century, the area became increasingly industrialised. In 1855, the Thames Soap and Candle Factory arrived – its motto: 'Greenwich: the world standard in both soap and time.' Transatlantic cables, clipper ships and steel were all made on the Peninsula in the late-Victorian boom years. This flat land of gas and power stations slumbered and declined in the last century – and was heavily bombed in the Second World War – but over the past 15 years it has woken up, thanks to a series of largely unrelated infrastructure bonuses.

In 1981, the regeneration of Docklands began, boosted by the extension of the Jubilee Line in the 1990s. The Dome was a spectacular flop in its original incarnation as a millennium showcase for the country, but as a concert venue it is now the most popular in the world, with over eight million visitors a year. The ExCeL Exhibition Centre, built in 2000, was helped by the rapid growth of City Airport over the past decade. Work on a new Thames road tunnel from the Peninsula to Silvertown on the north bank is planned to begin in 2017 and will be the icing on the cake.

As you walk the site, The Kinks' dirty old river, flanked by those charmingly faded factories, is increasingly eclipsed by the climbing, shimmering new village. An unloved corner of London has, at last, found its admirers. **ES** (greenwichpeninsula.co.uk; 020 3713 6153); *Harry Mount is the author of How England Made the English* (Penguin, £9.99)